



Book review

Research methods in human skeletal biology, Edited Elizabeth A. DiGangi, Megan K. Moore (Eds.). Elsevier Inc., USA (2013).

It is easy to forget, when looking back, how difficult it was when making those first early steps on the academic career path. And I don't mean those first grant applications, or even the doctoral research proposal. I mean even before then, when we were desperately trying to decide what final year dissertation to study as an undergrad. They say 'every journey starts with a single step', and it is this first step that DiGangi and Moore hope to help with.

'Research Methods in Human Skeletal Biology' is designed to be an aid to those students situated towards the end of their undergraduate studies or at the start of their postgraduate work. The two editors don't want to present the student with a lot of detail about how to sex a skeleton, or cut a histological slice, but rather have collected together a number of chapters which summarise key topics in the field, but with a clear emphasis on current and future research questions.

The book itself is a considerable size (at 552 pages) and is separated into four key sections. The first section ('Introduction to Research in Skeletal Biology') sets the scene for the scope of work in this field (the Preface and Foreword set the scene for the book itself) and includes a very good introduction to skeletal biology and a nice discussion on the application of the scientific method to skeletal studies. Both will be valuable to those new to research in skeletal studies, and particularly the first chapter's whistle-stop tour of the history of biological anthropology. The second section of the book ('Research on Aspects of the Biological Profile') comprises nine chapters, each one examining an aspect of the osteoprofile, such as age-at-death, sex, stature and ancestry estimation, pathologies and traumas, taphonomic change and so on. The third section ('Technological Advances') is more method-focussed, and provides five chapters from the increasingly popular geometric morphometrics to histology and biomolecular analyses. The volume concludes with the fourth and final section ('Completing and Cultivating the Scientific Process') containing chapters focussing on academic dissemination and future considerations for the subject. Each chapter follows a similar format with a nippy discussion of the topic and key issues which then leads into a discussion of the key research questions of interest at the moment (although the emphasis placed on this last point varies from chapter-to-chapter). Some chapters (such as the ones on stature estimation, palaeopathology and

trauma) also integrate case studies into the discussion, often to successfully demonstrate their utility in addressing or presenting research questions. Throughout the volume the figures and tables (of which there are plenty) are clear and easy to read. Each chapter also contains an excellent reference list, so if the reader does want to explore a given topic further there is much information offered.

Overall I very much enjoyed this book. Clearly though, I am not the target audience, so I also passed it around my students who likewise found it interesting and useful for helping to choose their own research projects.

I do not really have any criticisms of the book, but I will note that the title is slightly misleading. This is not really a book for all those working in human skeletal biology. Yes it will be of interest to them, but really this is a book for biological anthropologists and does not address issues pertinent to all skeletal biologists. I also felt that there were some interesting methods which could have been included in the third section, but were not. Naturally, since there are so many chapters and the aim of the book is not to be a reference text on biological anthropology *per se*, some of the issues within each topic are covered rather superficially. But, as mentioned previously, the reference lists will help any interested reader. In terms of the authors, there is a clear bias towards the forensic researchers based in, or associated with, the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. I suspect this is a result of the editors' own academic backgrounds and is understandable, although it could be argued that a more rounded perspective would have been achieved with greater use of academics from elsewhere (including outside of the US).

But these are minor issues which should not distract from what is a handsome volume and likely to be a very useful text to those beginning a career in biological anthropology, or indeed to those trying to advise such students.

Conflict of interest

None.

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